

GULF OF MEXICO GROUPEL MANAGEMENT IN FEDERAL WATERS

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

November 2006



Which species of grouper are managed in the Gulf of Mexico?

- The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) and NOAA Fisheries Service regulate the harvest of 15 grouper species.
 - Red, gag, black, scamp, yellowfin, yellowmouth, rock hind, and red hind grouper comprise the *shallow-water grouper complex*.
 - Snowy, yellowedge, speckled hind, warsaw, and misty grouper comprise the *deep-water grouper complex*.
 - Nassau and goliath grouper are managed as single species and are prohibited from being harvested.

What is the status of Gulf of Mexico grouper populations?

- Population assessments have been conducted for four of the 15 grouper species (red grouper, gag, goliath grouper, and yellowedge grouper).
 - The status of red grouper was most recently assessed in 2002, and will be assessed again in early 2007. The 2002 assessment determined the population was undergoing overfishing and below its optimal abundance level, but not overfished.
 - The status of gag was most recently assessed in 2006, and determined to be undergoing overfishing.
 - The status of yellowedge grouper was most recently assessed in 2002, and determined to be unknown.
 - The status of goliath grouper was most recently assessed in 2004, and determined to be unknown.

How do fishery managers determine whether fish populations are undergoing overfishing and/or overfished?

- A fish population is considered to be undergoing overfishing if it is fished at a rate that exceeds the rate that would produce the maximum amount of fish over time.
- A fish population is considered to be overfished if it declines below a legally defined threshold level, which is defined differently for each fish population based on life history characteristics and other factors.

How is the status of grouper populations determined?

- The status of grouper and other federally managed fisheries in the Southeastern United States is periodically evaluated through the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) process.
- The SEDAR process was initiated in 2002 to improve the quality and reliability of fisheries population assessments and emphasizes constituent and stakeholder participation in assessment development.
- Population assessments are rigorously reviewed during three separate week-long workshops.
 - The first is a data workshop, where datasets are documented, analyzed, reviewed, and compiled.
 - The second is an assessment workshop, where quantitative analyses are developed and refined.
 - The third is a review workshop, where the assessment is reviewed by a panel of experts who are not associated with NOAA Fisheries Service or the Gulf Council, and a status determination is made.
- The Gulf Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee also reviews final SEDAR reports and supporting information, and makes a determination supporting or opposing assessment methodologies and findings. This Committee is composed of economists, biologists, sociologists, and natural resource attorneys who are knowledgeable about the technical aspects of Gulf of Mexico fisheries.
- For more information about the SEDAR process visit: <http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/>.

What management measures have the Gulf Council and NOAA Fisheries Service implemented to end overfishing of gag and red grouper?

Gag

- In October 2006, NOAA Fisheries Service notified the Gulf Council gag was undergoing overfishing. The Gulf Council is required by law to end overfishing, and is currently developing preliminary management alternatives to reduce fishing mortality on gag.
- Public hearings on management alternatives will be held in early 2007.
- For more information about future public meetings held by the Council visit: www.gulfcouncil.org.

Red Grouper

- In July 2004, NOAA Fisheries Service implemented regulations intended to reduce red grouper harvest by 9.4 percent. These regulations included:

Commercial

- 5.31 million pound (MP) gutted weight *red grouper* quota.
- 8.80 MP gutted weight *shallow-water grouper* quota.
- Provision requiring the entire *shallow-water grouper* fishery be closed when either the *red grouper* or *shallow water grouper* quota is reached.

Recreational

- 1.25 MP gutted weight recreational target catch level.
- Two-fish red grouper bag limit within the aggregate five-fish grouper bag limit.

- In August 2005, NOAA Fisheries Service implemented an interim rule requested by the Gulf Council to reduce recreational red grouper harvest in 2005 because recreational red grouper landings exceeded the annual target catch level in both 2003 and 2004. Recreational red grouper landings in 2003 totaled 1.35 million pounds. Recreational red grouper landings in 2004 totaled 3.18 million pounds.
 - The interim rule temporarily reduced the red grouper bag limit from 2 fish to 1 fish per person per day, and prohibited the harvest of red grouper from November 1 to December 31, 2005.
- In July 2006, NOAA Fisheries Service replaced interim regulations with new regulations proposed by the Gulf Council through a regulatory amendment.
 - New regulations included a recreational bag limit of one red grouper per person per day and a rule prohibiting the captain and crew of for-hire vessels from retaining the bag limit of any grouper while under charter.
 - NOAA Fisheries Service delayed implementation of a one-month recreational seasonal closure proposed by the Gulf Council for red grouper, gag, and black grouper, in response to public comments opposing the closure and because the 2006 gag assessment was pending.
- In November 2006, NOAA Fisheries Service implemented the one-month recreational seasonal closure after the 2006 gag assessment confirmed the gag population was undergoing overfishing.

Why is a recreational seasonal closure for red grouper needed?

- The seasonal closure, in combination with the grouper bag limit provisions implemented in July 2006, is needed to end overfishing on the red grouper population.

Why are black grouper and gag included in the seasonal closure?

- Red grouper are part of a multispecies fishery, which includes gag and black grouper, as well as other groupers and snappers.
- Collectively, gag, red grouper, and black grouper account for more than 90 percent of the total annual recreational grouper landings.
- Prohibiting harvest of all three grouper species reduces the occurrence of bycatch, and prevents fishermen affected by restrictive red grouper regulations from shifting their effort to gag and black grouper.
- Although the current status of black grouper has not been assessed, it is similar in appearance to gag and, therefore, difficult for fishers to distinguish from gag.
- The seasonal closure coincides with the commercial grouper fishery closure established in 2000 for black grouper, red grouper, and gag, affording all three grouper species additional protection during their spawning season.

What federal regulations currently apply to the commercial grouper fishery in Gulf of Mexico federal waters?

- A prohibition on shallow-water grouper after the fishery lands either 8.8 million pounds gutted weight of shallow-water grouper species combined or 5.31 million pounds gutted weight of red grouper each year.
 - In 2004, the *shallow-water* and *red grouper* fisheries closed on November 15.
 - In 2005, the *shallow-water* and *red grouper* fisheries closed on October 10.

- A prohibition on deep-water grouper after the fishery lands 1.02 million pounds gutted weight of deep-water grouper species combined each year.
 - In 2004, the commercial *deep-water grouper* fishery closed on July 15.
 - In 2005, the commercial *deep-water grouper* fishery closed on June 23.
 - In 2006, the commercial *deep-water grouper* fishery closed on June 27.
- Minimum size limits for black grouper, gag, red grouper, yellowfin grouper, and scamp.
- A 6,000-pound gutted weight trip limit for all deep-water and shallow-water grouper species combined.
- Various gear restrictions.
- A seasonal closure for gag, red grouper, and black grouper, which occurs from February 15 to March 15 each year.

What federal regulations currently apply to the recreational grouper fishery in Gulf of Mexico federal waters?

- An annual red grouper target catch level of 1.25 million pounds gutted weight.
- A one red grouper bag limit.
- A five grouper aggregate bag limit.
- Minimum size limits for black grouper, red grouper, gag, yellowfin grouper, and scamp.
- A zero grouper bag limit for for-hire captain and crew while under charter.
- A prohibition on the harvest of Nassau grouper and goliath grouper.
- A one-fish per vessel possession limit for speckled hind and warsaw grouper.
- A seasonal closure for gag, red grouper, and black grouper, which occurs from February 15 through March 15 each year.

How can I participate in grouper management?

- For more information about current regulations and opportunities to become involved in the Council process, visit: www.gulfcouncil.org.